Michael Nolan

5/13/2014

Final Paper

Artificial Success, Statistical Failure

By Michael Nolan

# Abstract

Obesity is a pressing concern in the United States, and has been for many years. According to the CDC, over two thirds of adults over the age of twenty are considered overweight in this country (“Obesity and Overweight”). Obesity contributes to high blood pressure, diabetes, heart disease, and even cancer, and it is estimated that over 300,000 people die prematurely due to obesity-related effects every year in the United States. Clearly, this nation has a problem with weight.

In the wake of this problem, scores of diets, medications, and exercises have popped up which all aim to capitalize on the need of most Americans to lose weight. Many of these products and plans exist on the fringe, but some companies, such as Weight Watchers, Jenny Craig, and Nutrisystem, have become household names in weight loss and health. The most successful weight loss companies have hundreds of thousands of customers and celebrity endorsements. But how? How have the most successful weight loss companies become so widely-used?

One of the biggest reasons is that these companies have created a narrative of success: a story where anybody who manages to correctly follow their weight loss plan is guaranteed to succeed at their weight loss goals. These narratives are usually powerful, firsthand accounts from real people who have beaten their weight problems giving these companies both credibility and proof of success. Success stories, therefore, have become one of the key cornerstones of weight loss rhetoric.

But in the process of creating the success story, something has been lost. These weight loss companies have cherry picked the best, most convincing personal stories to form their narratives of success, while leaving out a much larger pool of unflattering or damaging stories. In doing this, they have created their own genre, an artificial narrative of success which is not representative of the average weight loss story.

I began with two research questions: what narrative traits do weight loss companies use to choose which stories to use in order to promote their sites? And what stories are lost during the synthesis of the genre of success created by weight loss companies? In this paper, I will show how weight loss companies have created an artificial genre of success which can be misleading to the audience by making it appear that weight loss programs are more effective than they are for the majority of customers.

# Rhetorical Situation – Success Stories Artifacts

For this paper I analyzed the “success stories” sections in the websites of three major weight loss companies: Weight Watchers, Jenny Craig, and Nutrisystem. All three of these companies are popular and well-established due to the use of a diet system where dieters are allowed to have foods that they love while still carefully monitoring their food choices, supposedly allowing dieters to lose weight easily without having to give up their favorite foods.

Naturally, weight loss companies want to market their services as successful to their potential customers. But since praises for the effectiveness of a company’s product usually have less force and credibility when they come directly from the company itself, Weight Watchers, Jenny Craig, and Nutrisystem have decided to use testimonials from their most successful customers to back up the companies’ credibility. The Success Stories sections include several dozen stories each, supposedly written by former and current users of the company’s weight loss system, which all describe the amazing transformations experienced by the authors after becoming customers of whichever company they are endorsing. Each website creates a controlled and attractive narrative where customers always succeed in their weight loss goals.

The intended audience for these artifacts is made up of people who want to lose weight through dieting and are searching for a weight loss program, people who are already considering one of the companies and want to be reassured that the program will work for them, and people who are already using the company and want to be reassured that they will succeed if they stick with the program. Because the audience must be convinced that their company of choice’s services are effective and any customers will reach their goals if they stick with the program, the biggest constraint on these artifacts is that there must not be any stories of people who tried the Weight Watchers, Jenny Craig, or Nutrisystem program and failed to meet their goals. Secondary constraints include the need to make the stories easily readable and relatable to the audience in order to hook them and convince them of their legitimacy, the need to make the stories sound intelligent and well-written, and the need to pick the stories which will show the company in the most favorable light.

Since these artifacts are a series of stories, it is clear that the companies are creating a narrative. Since it was the companies’ intention to create a narrative, it is only natural that I would choose to use a narrative analysis on the artifact. The narrative perspective allowed me to analyze the individual stories that make up the Success Stories section, as well as analyze the greater narrative that is constructed by the individual stories as a whole.

However, because these stories all share similar traits and have a similar purpose, I also employed genre criticism in order to analyze the traits of the success genre. This allowed me to discover and describe what makes a story a “success story” and how success stories differ from other stories about weight loss experience.

# Narrative Elements

Although the stories that make up the Success Stories pages are written by a variety of authors with different experiences, they all have many similar traits. This is likely because Weight Watchers, Jenny Craig, and Nutrisystem intended to construct consistent narratives, and chose authors with stories that were similar in structure and message. The consistency makes analyzing the artifacts simpler, but it also means that the narrative is more artificial, like a carefully pruned decorative plant instead of a tree allowed to grow unrestricted.

All of the stories that make up the artifacts have a similar cast of characters. The protagonist, who is the author, is someone who struggles with their weight, and has struggled all their life. The antagonist is the weight problem that they struggle against. While this would suggest that the protagonist and antagonist are the same person, the extra weight is often treated as a separate entity from the protagonist. Rhetorically, this removes much of the personal blame and shame from the protagonist, and by extension, the audience. Their weight issues become an external force to fight against, rather than a personal failing. This is the first step in making the audience more susceptible to the persuasive nature of the artifact.

There are often secondary characters as well, usually friends and family of the protagonist. Sometimes the secondary characters act as inspiration for the protagonist to begin losing weight; several authors, for example, decided to lost weight in order to be more active with their children. Other times, the secondary characters take on a more active role as the emotional support for the protagonist. The role of the secondary characters in the overall narrative is to stress the importance of having support to help with the process of losing weight. This is important because occasionally the supporting secondary characters appear in stories in the form of a support group, and the companies’ support groups are promoted very heavily in general around the websites as well. By making emotional support such an important part of losing weight and indirectly connecting that support to another company service, the artifacts reinforce their persuasive power to convince the audience to become customers.

The plot of an individual story usually begins with some account of how the protagonist came to be overweight, and how the weight has caused them to suffer both physically and mentally through the years. Frequently included are anecdotes about previous attempts to lose weight with other methods, which always end with relapse back into being overweight.

After high school I started to put on a little bit of weight. But I was in denial because back then I could eat anything I wanted without consequence. Then in 2010 I was diagnosed with breast cancer. I was just 24 years old. I went through chemotherapy, surgery and radiation. By the end of my treatments I’d gained an additional 25 pounds. I beat the cancer but I never thought I’d get back to my pre-cancer weight again. I was in the obese weight range and felt stuck in my own body. I’d essentially given up on myself. – “Phuong,” Weight Watchers

The plot then shifts to show the protagonist’s first interaction with their company of choice—sometimes through a friend or coworker, sometimes through a work meeting, and sometimes by personal choice—and an epiphany that they can lose weight using the system.

“I had tried so many different diets before from pills, drinks and even other meal programs that all inevitably failed. I wanted a quick fix or at least something that would make me start to feel better about myself. Then came my answer … ‘Have you called Jenny?’” – “Michelle P.,” Jenny Craig

The story will show how the protagonist begins to successfully lose weight steadily with the weight loss program and keep it off. The plot then ends with the protagonist describing their new situation: they are happier, healthier, and able to do new things that they never thought they could before, or do old things that they used to do before they became overweight. The protagonist will have fun hobbies, better relationships, and a more fulfilling life.

“Here I am, three years later and I’m still managing my weight loss. I feel better than I ever have, and I’m more active than I ever thought I could be. Now, I am out running and playing with my kids. When I look in the mirror I'm still in shock. I’ve finally conquered something that has been with me for so long.” – “Michelle R.,” Nutrisystem

One important point that frequently appears in the stories is how much fun the protagonist has going to company meetings and how much they enjoy getting to have delicious food while using their system.

I was never aware of how many PointsPlus values fried chicken and other comfort foods were. So I started to make healthier versions of the foods I love using recipes from WeightWatchers.com. There are recipes for every occasion — I even made a healthy Thanksgiving dinner! – “Rhonda,” Weight Watchers

Another important point that is emphasized is the importance of community in losing weight. Support from friends and family, and especially from support groups, is often cited by the authors as a significant factor in helping them succeed in losing weight. Both of these plot points are meant to support the persuasive nature of the narrative.

It was really a team effort for us to lose 300 pounds. We leaned on each other, supported each other. We have accountability in meetings, but we keep each other accountable every day. As a couple, that makes us stronger. My wife laughs about how we both can fit into her wedding dress now. – “Mike,” Weight Watchers

There are several themes present throughout the narrative, though the one that appears most frequently and the one I’ve already mentioned is that of community. Support from secondary characters is a crucial part of the narrative. However, another theme I noticed was that of self-help. This seems counterintuitive, since self-help seems to go against the idea of being supported. However, the stories set up these themes to create a narrative where the decision to lose weight and the work that is put into losing weight is all done by the protagonist. Support is an essential part of weight loss, but the hard work is done by the protagonist; therefore, the protagonist earns their success with their own strength.

The final theme I noticed that I think is important is commitment. Most of the authors wrote about how losing weight requires a great deal of commitment: commitment to lose weight, commitment to stick to the weight loss program, commitment to not relapse back into old habits, and commitment to remain healthy once the weight has been lost.

The last 10 pounds came off a little more slowly for me. I hit a bit of a plateau. But you just have to keep with it. There are other victories to be had. I kept exercising and eating right, and while I might not have lost weight every week, the inches kept coming off! That was a challenge at first, but now I’m accustomed to it and realize the importance of staying on Plan no matter what. – “Rhonda,” Weight Watchers

In a couple of instances, this became an argument to remain in the company program even after reaching the desired weight goal, sometimes even for life. Stressing the importance of commitment allows the authors to impress upon the audience what kind of dedication is required to lose weight, but it also allows Weight Watchers, Jenny Craig, and Nutrisystem to persuade their potential customers to remain members for life, creating a more lucrative client base.

The setting is least important out of all of the narrative elements in this artifact. Since there are so many different sources for the individual stories, the settings are often different. One setting that does appear with some frequency is the support group meeting, but this has already been covered. Some authors discuss how they frequently visited doctors due to their weight problems affecting their health, which led to their resolutions to lose weight, but for the most part, the setting was not a very important part of the overall narrative.

# Narrative Function

The narrative seems to be primarily persuasive. The stories about weight loss are designed to convince all kinds of people that weight loss is possible and doable, and that anybody can lose weight, no matter how old or sick or busy they are. What’s more, the stories try to persuade the readers that they can keep the weight off and have a much happier, more fulfilling life if they lose the weight. All of this is so that the stories can convince the readers to try out a company program, because all of these stories sing praise for the companies, crediting their programs with the protagonists’ miraculous weight loss. They also stress that the program is essential, and also a lifelong commitment to being healthy, because without that lifelong commitment the weight may come back. One story even mentions that a woman is becoming a Weight Watchers helper, giving extra weight to the persuasion that Weight Watchers is a good support group that will help you, and even hinting to the possibility of helping others and also having some sort of career or job opportunity.

I enjoyed watching others see success on and off the scale and change their behaviors little by little. When I had the opportunity to become a Leader I jumped on it. Now I don’t even feel like I have a job; it feels like a second family to me. I look forward to all of my meetings and I always thank my members for donating their valuable time to building a strong foundation for a healthy life. – “Lisa,” Weight Watchers

The individual stories are moderately good at keeping the audience’s attention, mostly by being rather short and upbeat. The authors keep their stories brief enough to make the stories easy to read, but long enough to include details that make the audience feel sympathetic toward the protagonist Another thing that helps is the inclusion of a set of before-and-after photos on the top of every story, showing with a powerful visual just how successful the author was at losing weight. Since the intended audience is people who want to lose weight themselves, they see these photos and want to know how the author lost their weight, which encourages them to read the story, which in turn encourages them to try out the weight loss program. The before-and-after photos also make the stories much more credible. These stories are supposedly written by people who have all experienced obesity and lost weight, but since anybody can write a story, seeing photographic proof of their transformation instantly makes their stories much more believable.

One thing that I think is notable is the consistency of the structure shared by these individual stories. Since all of the stories share a similar format, the reader can become familiar with the pattern of how these stories work. This is good for making people get faster at reading the stories and wanting to read more. However, it also means that the stories can become predictable and boring after a while. For example, after reading just a couple of stories myself, I found that I was beginning to skim the stories and skip through major sections, simply because I had read all of the plot points before and I didn’t feel like reading them again. This shows that, while consistency in the stories is important for a carefully constructed narrative like the ones used by Weight Watchers, Jenny Craig, and Nutrisystem, it also makes the narrative somewhat stale, which can turn some audience members away.

The main story pages for Weight Watchers and Nutrisystem have tabs for different kinds of stories to relate to nearly any kind of person who is thinking about losing weight, which means that a wide variety of people can find a story to identify with. The stories themselves are written about people who were in the same overweight situation as potential readers, which further increases the sense of identification. However, I’m not sure if there’s enough raw detail or recounting of suffering for the stories to hit close enough to home. I personally felt like some of the epiphanies or stories seemed a bit to clean, too engineered. As someone who has experienced the stigma of being overweight firsthand, and dieted to lose weight, I felt like the stories were just that: stories. They didn’t feel especially real to me, which hurt their credibility. The stories also seemed to be written a bit too professionally, as if the raw narratives had been taken from the authors and then refined by professional writers. While this makes the stories read more intelligently, it also makes me suspicious just how genuine they are.

As a result of these shortcomings, I felt that the stories were all a little hit or miss. As I mentioned earlier, they do an admirable attempt at describing the life and suffering and turnaround of the subjects, but there isn’t enough vivid detail to put me directly into the shoes of the authors. I have gone through the same kind of things that many of these writers have gone through, and a lot of the time I felt that I wasn’t looking into the real life of someone with similar problems. However, it is also possible that I am biased on this issue.

The accounts of the suffering and struggles of the subjects, as well as their happiness and improved lives after dieting, appeals to the pathos of the reader by getting them sympathetic, then excited, for the protagonists. There also seems to be an undercurrent of logos—all of these people have lost weight and had better lives by dieting with the help of a weight loss program, so logically, using this program can help you have a happier life as well if you’re overweight. Ethos is established by having the stories written by successful customers directly instead of the companies. In fact, it could be argued that the entire point of creating a genre of success stories written by satisfied customers is to create ethos.

# Probability and Rationality

The narrative constructed by these individual stories is plenty probable. The structures are consistent and coherent: people with weight issues struggle to lose weight, discover a weight loss system, and by using that system in conjunction with support from friends and family, they steadily lose weight. It’s a simple structure, but because of its simplicity, it is easy to follow. The characters and material are just as consistent throughout the stories, which means that this artifact has a very probable narrative.

However, the fidelity of the narrative is a bit more questionable. Those with personal experience with being overweight and with dieting may find these narratives too clean and easy. To a someone who is a veteran of being overweight and has experienced the setbacks, relapses, and failures common to the weight loss struggle, the way these stories always show bountiful success with weight loss after committing to a weight loss company’s program seems might seem just a bit too fake. I also thought that the clean and consistent writing style took the individual personality out of the stories, and I wondered how much of the content I read was directly from the authors, and how much was doctored by the company. While I doubt that these narratives are entirely fabricated, the lack of variety shows that they are undoubtedly carefully chosen. I believe that because of this, it is evident that only the most positive, flattering stories have been chosen out of a larger pool to create a success story genre. This makes the narrative ring more false than true, at least in my eyes.

# Genre Analysis

Due to the similarity between the stories used to create the success story narrative for each company’s Success Story section, as well as the similarity between the Success Stories sections of all three sites, I believe that these companies have created a rhetorical genre. This success genre is what defines what a customer’s story must be in order to be featured on a company website, as well as what a customer’s story must *not* be. In other words, the success genre is like a checklist of traits that customer testimonial must have in order to qualify as a success story.

The most easily identifiable trait of the success story as a genre is the plot structure. Every success story begins with some sort of recounting by the author of how they came to be overweight—either through some sort of lifestyle change, such as going to college or having a baby, or by just always having been an overweight person—and how they have struggled and suffered due to their weight issues.

“Ten years ago, I made an effort to lose weight and did really well. I got to the point where I felt better but stopped the diet. The weight rolled back on. My diets were always a case of restriction. The focus was on what you can't eat. It wasn't sustainable.” – “Mike,” Weight Watchers

This part of the narrative serves two purposes: it shows the exigence of why the author needed to lose weight, and creates a sense of identification with any audience members who might have similar weight problems. Often, the story will also include accounts of how the author struggled and failed with various weight loss programs, diets, and exercises that *aren’t* associated with the company being promoted. This shows why weight loss is difficult and why resorting to a company like Weight Watchers or Jenny Craig would be of benefit to someone who would struggle otherwise.

A success story will then recount how the author came to decide to use whichever weight loss company they are promoting—whether hearing about a company through a friend, family member, or colleague, seeing an advertisement, or simply deciding to try out a company program on their own. Then, the story shifts into how using said company’s program provided amazing results for the author, as well as how much the author’s life has improved since losing weight—usually in terms of feeling better physically and mentally, as well as having better relationships. Often, the author will also remark that their program of choice is fun, easy, and allows them to continue eating delicious food while still losing weight.

“The Weight Watchers program really clicked with us. It was like a game, keeping score and strategizing with PointsPlus® values. We could follow the Good Health Guidelines and still enjoy a treat! Neither of us were picky eaters, but we started finding substitutions for less-healthy foods and discovered we like things like tofu and squash.” – “Mike,” Weight Watchers

These are the core traits of the success story which form the success genre. It is important to note, however, that there are some slight differences between the individual companies. In terms of story structure, Weight Watchers employs a question-and-answer style interview format, where the customer writes responses to questions asked by Weight Watchers. A typical Weight Watchers story will feature questions such as: “What was life like before you lost weight;” “What sparked you to turn your life around;” “How has this been different from previous weight loss attempts;” and “What can you do now that you couldn’t before?” These questions clearly steer the author to provide answers that fit the success genre.

Jenny Craig, on the other hand, opts for a simpler style in which the authors write a letter to the company, always beginning with the phrase “Dear Jenny.” The letter format is less controlled and more free-flowing, but the Jenny Craig stories still follow the same traits established by the genre. Nutrisystem, meanwhile, uses a much simpler and more clinical style, where each success story is simply a set of three block quotes by the author. The Nutrisystem approach is much more cut down than the other companies, but it too hits the core traits of the success genre.

However, there is one notable trait that differs between each company’s narrative: support. The support of friends and family is frequently a major part of every success story for every company. However, support from the company itself is something that is handled differently by each company. Weight Watchers stories almost always have authors that talk about how amazing and helpful the company’s support groups are. The Weight Watchers support groups are a very big selling point for the company, and always heavily featured when possible. Jenny Craig doesn’t endorse support groups; instead, the Jenny Craig uses individual counselors to support their customers, and the stories always reflect this fact. Jenny Craig authors love their counselors, and never fail to mention how much their counselor helped them in the weight loss process. Nutrisystem stories, on the other hand, never talk about any form of company support, instead relying only on the core genre traits to promote the company.

This difference in how to address the issue of emotional support, as well as the difference in style and structure between each company, has led me to adopt a segmented view of the success genre. There are overarching traits that form a genre common to all three companies. But each company also has specific features that are unique, meaning that the success genre is modified by each company to become that company’s specific genre of success. In this way of thinking, there is the Weight Watchers success genre, the Nutrisystem success genre, and the Jenny Craig success genre, which are all different enough to be distinct from each other, while still retaining enough similarity to be considered part of the larger overall genre of success established by all three companies.

# The Statistics

Considering how much of a problem obesity is in the United States, just about any large-scale effort to improve health and help people lose weight is a good thing. In that light, Weight Watchers, Jenny Craig, and Nutrisystem are a positive force. Any significant amount of weight loss would be of benefit to the vast majority of overweight adults in this country.

But the miraculous transformations promised by these companies are not nearly as common as the genre of success would have you believe. The truth is that most people who become weight loss company customers only lost a couple of pounds at best. Worse, most of the people who do lose weight gain a significant portion of it back in a couple of years. While it is true that some people do manage to shed dozens of pounds and completely remake themselves, as evidenced by the mere existence of the customer testimonials featured on every company’s website, these remarkable people are an extremely small minority.

According to one study paid for by Weight Watchers, the average company member loses about 22 pounds on the program, which seems impressive. Within five years, however, most dieters had regained 11 pounds—about half of what they lost. Since the average starting weight of a Weight Watchers customer is about 165 pounds, this translates to a net loss of only about 5% of body weight (Lowe). While this is enough to improve health, it certainly isn’t anything like the kind of success implied by the success stories on the Weight Watchers website. It is also important to note that this study only involved the most successful members of Weight Watchers: individuals who had reached their goal weight, meaning that Weight Watchers members who failed to reach their goal weight are entirely left out of the statistics.

Unfortunately, Jenny Craig and Nutrisystem are somewhat less studied that Weight Watchers, so I was unable to find any equivalent studies for those companies. However, we can at least assume that those companies have similar levels of success with their customers, and that their success stories are not representative of the normal experience either.

# The Lost Stories

When comparing the statistics to the success stories, I confirmed that there is a disconnect between the world of the success genre and the world of reality. This disconnect isn’t just about how much weight is lost by the average successful company member; it’s about the mystery behind what happens to members who don’t succeed. There are no stories featured on any of the companies’ websites for people who lost some weight but never met their goal. Nor are there stories featured by people who completely failed to lose weight while on the program. And of course, there are no stories about people who successfully lost weight on their own, without the help of a company.

These shortcomings are to be expected. These companies need to promote themselves, after all, and to do that they need to show their audience the best possible stories to create the best possible advertisements. But because of how narrowly focused the success genre is, there are all sorts of stories that are lost in the process of creating that genre, limiting the mainstream weight loss narrative.

On an online weight loss community called Spark People, I found a short post by a man who calls himself a “Weight Watchers failure.” Far from being hopeful or inspiring, the post simply states, “I feel like a total failure. I am turning 41 and weigh 265 pounds. I am a single gay man. I am fat in a culture that puts fitness above everything except for youth. I don't have that either, anymore” (NYCJoshua ). While this story may be short, it also shows just how different a story about using Weight Watchers can be compared to the success genre. This man did not succeed, he did not have fun, and he does not have a better, more fulfilling life because of the program.

Contrasting this, I found a much longer artifact also written by a former Weight Watchers member titled “[Weight Watchers Probably Won't Help You Lose Tons of Weight, So Maybe Stop Dieting?](http://jezebel.com/5965067/weight-watchers-probably-wont-help-you-lose-tons-of-weight-so-maybe-stop-dieting)” (Beck). This article, rather than being short and despairing, is long and critical. The author creates her own narrative which alternates between her own experience with Weight Watchers—how she felt when doing the program, her success, etc…—and her critical opinions about the company.

The author deconstructs many of the features of Weight Watchers that are praised by most authors who write success stories for the company. She decries the point value system as being flawed and constantly-changing, saying “the new plan, dubbed Weight Watchers 360, is pretty much almost exactly the same as the last time I attended . . . with a few more add-ons to purchase. Of course” (Beck). She also finds fault in her support group leader and is skeptical of the less-than-desperate circumstances of most support group members, criticizes the Weight Watchers culture which she believes indoctrinates children, and concludes that the program encourages short-term gains rather than long-term lifestyle skills, and that it is effective more for people who want to lose a couple of insignificant pounds rather than people with real weight problems.

“There were the women who presented, at least to me, as being socially acceptable weights. I sat next to a few of them, and they shared with me the pain of trying to lose the "last five pounds". Anyone who's ever been to a WW meeting will let you know that this person is a common fixture. While perhaps not technically underweight, and you can't tell anything by looking at a person, I'd find it highly unlikely that these people needed to lose weight for medical reasons.” – Laura Beck

Another interesting artifact I found was an article about Iris Higgins, a former Jenny Craig counselor who issued a public apology through Huffington Post to Jenny Craig customers for what she believes to be a failure of a weight loss program. She writes that she has come to believe that the things she promoted, such as low-calorie diets, fad diets, and unrealistic body image expectations, may have done more harm than good to women who were desperate to lose weight (Higgins). Her letter tugs at the heartstrings, making the reader feel the depth of her grief at how much damage she believes she has done.

“And that's mostly why I'm sorry. Because I've been played for years, and so have you, and inadvertently, I fed into the lies you've been told your whole life. The lies that say that being healthy means nothing unless you are also thin. The lies that say that you are never enough, that your body is not a beautiful work of art, but rather a piece of clay to be molded by society's norms until it becomes a certain type of sculpture. And even then, it is still a work in progress.” – Iris Higgins

In regards to Nutrisystem, I found an article simply titled “My Nutrisystem Experience” written by an unnamed author who had tried multiple weight loss programs and failed, including failing at the Nutrisystem program twice. However, this article is a bit different in that the author simply uses their experience failing at Nutrisystem and other programs in order to promote yet another weight loss program called Fat Loss for Idiots (“My NutriSystem Experience”).

“I tried Nutrisystem twice, but failed both! I did go through weeks of losing a couple of pounds, but only to gain them back :-( . . . ["Fat Loss for Idiots"](http://clayclick.4idiots.hop.clickbank.net/?tc=123&gg=1037577240) is the program that got me off the roller coaster of Nutrisystem . . . Now that I know the correct way to eat, I understand why Nutrisystem didn't work for me and many others. You're not going to learn to eat right by pre-packaged food, and paying money constantly.” – “My NutsiSystem Experience”

In fact, I found several examples of authors who wrote about their failures with Weight Watchers, Nutrisystem, or Jenny Craig in order to promote alternative programs. Narratives like these actually resemble the success genre rather closely, except that they include Weight Watchers/Jenny Craig/Nutrisystem as another detriment to their health, rather than a benefit. These alternate stories conclude with an endorsement for an alternate weight loss program just as the major company stories endorse the companies’ programs.

“I tried [Weight Watchers] for several years and never had huge success. The main reason was because they claim that you can eat what you want and still lose weight . . . The main problem that I had it[sic] didn't teach me to be better and stronger. It enabled me to eat good [sic] 70% of the time and splurge the 30% of the time. I changed to [My Fitness Pal] and love that it doesn't cost anything.” – “From failing at Weight Watchers to MFP”

Finally, I found several examples of stories by people who managed to succeed at losing weight without help from a weight loss program. One woman, Tammy Munson, wrote a bit about her experience losing 147 pounds and kept it off for eight years without resorting to help from a weight loss company. Her story begins similarly to the success stories featured on company websites, setting up the exigence by recounting how her life was when she and her husband were overweight. “I'd get up in the morning and have ice cream and cookies . . . Our wedding pictures are really funny . . . We broke the bed when we were first married” (Fritsch).

“You've got to find it for yourself . . . And don't spend money on it. You can get it for free. You can get if from reading. It's just the food pyramid, but people don't want to hear it. Slimfast, Optifast, you can't live like that forever . . . You eat a lot of good stuff and a little bad stuff, and you'll be fine, but you've got to have the little bad stuff, too.” – Tammy Munson

In fact, her story follows the success genre created by the weight loss companies very closely, with the primary difference simply being the lack of endorsement for a program. I found a similar structure in other stories of success written by people who lost weight without the help of a weight loss program. This suggests that narratives about successfully losing weight naturally follow a similar story structure whether or not they are written as testimonials for a company.

# My Findings

My initial analysis of the success narratives of Weight Watchers, Jenny Craig, and Nutrisystem found that while the success narrative is cohesive, it isn’t complete. The stories that make up the narrative have been carefully cultivated into a narrow genre which only has room for stories of outstanding success, while stories of partial success, failure, or success without the help of a weight loss program are excluded. The narrative is designed to promote the effectiveness of weight loss companies in order to sell the companies’ services to the audience. It creates a specific if/then scenario, where if someone who wants to lose weight uses a company program, then they will lose that weight successfully and keep it off.

After doing some searching, I did, in fact, find a wide variety of stories which narrated scenarios of failure, partial success, or alternative success. This confirmed my suspicions that the success genre created by weight loss companies excludes a great deal of narratives. These stories were much more varied in length, style, form, and credibility compared to the tightly regulated stories of the success genre, since they were spread all over the web and did not conform to a single created genre.

I also found that, statistically, the stories of the success genre do not represent the experiences of the average person trying to lose weight. Most people losing weight tend to fail or relapse after losing weight, or else fail to reach their goal, even if they are a client of a weight loss company. As for those who manage to succeed at losing weight, most of the time they only lose ten to twenty pounds, and often regain half of what they lost over time. But the success genre makes it appear as though anybody who sticks to the program of a weight loss company will succeed at losing significant amounts of weight and keep it off.

Taken together, these facts suggest that one must take the wonderful stories of success presented by any weight loss company with a grain of salt. While it may be true that Weight Watchers, Nutrisystem, Jenny Craig, and any other weight loss company do help people lost weight, on average, they don’t help all of their customers achieve the kind of amazing weight loss that they showcase on their websites. Most customers are more likely to see only minor, mixed results. For most people in this country, losing any amount of weight is an improvement. But the success genre has created unrealistic expectations for success, so that a person could sign up for Jenny Craig or Nutrisystem fully expecting to lose fifty pounds and instead only lose twelve. In a situation like that, one could say that person was misled into paying money for a service that did not perform as advertised.

The issue at hand is informed consent. Ethically, a person should be fully informed of what they are going to subject themselves to and what the results are going to be if they are going to devote time, energy, and money to a weight loss program. If the experience and the results of that program end up being radically different than what was expected, then that person was not given proper informed consent.

I find that this is a dilemma that often occurs with many popular diet systems. Product promotion is important for any company in order to survive. But because a company naturally only represents the very best it has to offer, diet systems and weight loss companies have begun to create artificial narratives of success which have created an entire culture of false assumptions about what is healthy and unrealistic expectations. That is why it is always important to understand that any rhetorical narrative that promotes a specific program for weight loss has been carefully chosen out of a much larger variety of narratives to be the best possible representation of success.

Bibliography

Beck, Laura. "Weight Watchers Probably Won't Help You Lose Tons of Weight, So Maybe Stop Dieting?" *Jezebel*. Gawker Media, 4 Dec. 2012. Web. 11 May 2014.

Fatfu. "Weight Watchers Works. For Two Out of a Thousand. (And They Probably Weren't Fat to Begin With)." *Fat Fu*. N.p., 24 Jan. 2008. Web. 1 May 2014.

Fritsch, Jane. "95% Regain Lost Weight. Or Do They?" *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 24 May 1999. Web. 1 May 2014.

Higgins, Iris. "An Open Apology to All of My Weight Loss Clients." *The Huffington Post*. The Huffington Post, 16 Aug. 2013. Web. 11 May 2014.

Imnotperfecto. "From failing at Weight Watchers to MFP." *MyFitnessPal*. MyFitnessPal, 25 Aug. 2013. Web. 11 May 2014.

Lisa. "Lisa's New Lease on Life." *Weight Watchers*. Weight Watchers, n.d. Web. 1 May 2014.

Lowe, M. R., K. Miller-Kovach, and S. Phelan. "Weight-loss Maintenance in Overweight Individuals One to Five Years following Successful Completion of a Commercial Weight Loss Program." *International Journal of Obesity* 25.3 (2001): 325-31. Print.

Mike. "Family Man Engineers Transformation." *Weight Watchers*. Weight Watchers, n.d. Web. 1 May 2014.

NYCJoshua. "I Am a Weight Watchers Failure." *My SparkPeople*. SparkPeople, 22 July 2012. Web. 1 May 2014.

"Obesity and Overweight." *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 21 Nov. 2013. Web. 11 May 2014.

P., Michelle. "Real Lives, Real Change." *Jenny Craig*. Jenny Craig, n.d. Web. 11 May 2014.

Phuong. "Surviving and Thriving." *Weight Watchers*. Weight Watchers, n.d. Web. 1 May 2014.

Piepenburg, Erik. "An Endless Cycle of Failed Diets." *Well*. The New York Times, 5 Oct. 2010. Web. 1 May 2014.

R., MIchelle. "Michelle R. Lost 41.0 Lbs." *Successful Stories of Weight Loss*. Nutrisystem, n.d. Web. 11 May 2014.

Rhonda. "Fit and Fabulous by 50." *Weight Watchers*. Weight Watchers, n.d. Web. 11 May 2014.

Unknown. "My NutriSystem Experience." *My NutriSystem Story*. N.p., 13 Jan. 2009. Web. 12 May 2014.